

LIFE

While the recently concluded World Cup was in full swing in Qatar, the people of a particular city in China were busy making soccer history of their own.

Zibo, a city in Shandong province, was named in 2004 by soccer’s governing body, FIFA, as the “home of soccer”, based on the fact that the ancient Chinese sport of *cuju* was acknowledged by FIFA as the earliest form of soccer.

“Many people buy *cuju* sets to play for fun, or use as a gift to give to friends,” says Yu Jian, an inheritor of *cuju* equipment manufacturing in Linzi district of Zibo city.

Sales during the World Cup are usually at least twice that of normal, he reveals.

Cuju was an ancient Chinese game involving the kicking of a ball. Its origin has been traced back to the Linzi district, which was the capital city of the ancient Qi state, a state that existed for more than 800 years during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC) and the Warring States Period (475-221 BC).

“*Cuju*, the ancient Chinese game, has gone beyond sport. It has become a platform to enhance exchanges and mutual learning among different civilizations.”

Yu Jian, inheritor of *cuju* equipment manufacturing in Zibo, Shandong province

The word *cu* means to kick, while *ju* refers to an ancient type of leather ball stuffed with feathers or grain chaff.

Cuju is recorded in the ancient Chinese historical text *Zhan Guo Ce* (Strategies of the Warring States), which describes it as one of many forms of entertainment among the public.

Historical books show that, during the Han Dynasty (202 BC-AD 220), *cuju* was commonly played by soldiers for military training purposes. During the Tang Dynasty (618-907), women played *cuju* at the royal court for the entertainment of the emperors.

Cuju flourished during the Song Dynasty (960-1279), extending its popularity to every class, before its decline during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), which saw the 2,000-year-old game slowly fade away.

In 2006, *cuju* was listed among China’s first batch of intangible cultural heritage items.

Yu, in his 60s, has been studying and making *cuju* equipment for nearly two decades. In his workshop, *cuju* balls stuffed with cotton and made with four, six or eight leather panels are on show.

“The manufacturing techniques evolved during different times. For



Having a ball

Inheritors use the platform of the World Cup to promote cultural exchanges through the ancient Chinese sport of *cuju*, the forebear of modern soccer, reports **Zhao Ruixue** in Jinan.



Top: Handmade *cuju* balls, created using techniques such as weaving and embroidery with wool and silk yarn. **Middle:** Chinese and Qatari youth try the ancient Chinese game of *cuju* at an exchange-and-experience activity held in Doha, Qatar, in November. **Above left:** Yu Jian, an inheritor of *cuju* equipment manufacturing techniques in Linzi district of Zibo city, Shandong province, makes a leather *cuju* ball. **Above right:** Students try making *cuju* balls at a workshop run by Yu. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

example, the balls were stitched together with four pieces of leather during the Qi state, and in the Han era, it was six pieces,” says Yu.

All of the *cuju* balls made in Yu’s workshop are handmade. His *cuju* products have been sold to more than 130 countries and regions.

To protect and promote the manufacturing techniques of *cuju* balls and equipment, Yu provides courses for students who come to his workshop to study and try their hand at making *cuju* equipment, welcoming around 10,000 people every year.

Students in Linzi are not only learning how to make *cuju* equipment, but also playing the game as a form of exercise and to master the techniques of playing this ancient style of soccer.

“Side-flicking”, “chest down” and “shoulder stopper” are some of the essential moves mastered by *cuju* players. Li Weipeng, a seventh-generation inheritor of *cuju*, has been practicing these skills for 18 years.

The 34-year-old is now perfect at different *cuju* techniques. However, when he joined the *cuju* team in 2004, he was stumped by the simplest of moves, even though he had been playing football for a decade.

Li had undergone professional football training since he was 8 years old. In 2004, when the *cuju* team in Linzi was looking to recruit players, he signed up.

“At the beginning, I spent eight hours a day practicing juggling a ball. It was exhausting,” says Li.

When Li could juggle a ball hundreds of times in a row, he started practicing other skills such as side-flicking and “chest down”.

Li is now able to juggle a ball with his foot over 10,000 times in a row.

Linzi district has been promoting the ancient game at the campuses of each primary and middle school. *Cuju* moves have been adapted into dances and morning exercises.

Teaching students *cuju* techniques is a part of Li’s job.

“Students show great interest in playing *cuju*, which encourages me to promote the ancient sport,” says Li.

During the World Cup in Qatar, Li gave a demonstration of *cuju* at a China-Qatar youth exchange activity held in Doha. He led Chinese and Qatari youth players, wearing traditional *cuju* costumes, to experience the ancient game and see for themselves the similarities and differences between *cuju* and modern football.

“As soon as we started, many football fans gathered around us. When we demonstrated the different moves, they cheered for us and gave us the thumbs-up,” says Li, adding that many people were curious and keen to interact with the *cuju* players.

“*Cuju*, the ancient Chinese game, has gone beyond sport. It has become a platform to enhance exchanges and mutual learning among different civilizations,” says Yu.

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How to make chats with cabbies less taxing ... for both parties

Flagging down a cab, either with an app or the old-fashioned way by waving an arm at a passing taxi, may seem like a quaint undertaking from a



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Second Thoughts

bygone era, given the pesky tenacity of the contagion. But things will improve, hopefully sooner rather than later. So, with the holiday season fast approaching, people will have to start taking cabs once again,

because not all destinations in big Chinese cities are walking distance apart.

I want to talk about talking. Specifically, what is the level and depth of conversation you are comfortable having with

taxi drivers, as the meter is running. First of all, let’s just assume we’re in a post-contagion world and mask-wearing is “so 2022”, therefore there’s no cloth or paper squares covering drivers’ and passengers’ mouths alike, muzzling any possibility for crisp ungarbled speech.

Another assumption — and this is a bit of a stretch — let’s just assume that all ferrymen and their fares have no linguistic barrier. I know, it’s hard to get past this, but please work with me, dear reader!

For our purposes here, a fare flags down a cab and settles into the back seat, opposite corner to the driver, perhaps in a subconscious attempt to distribute the human weight more evenly, or perhaps in China because this is

the most convenient spot for passengers to plop themselves down, as traffic rides on the right side of the road here. So, our passenger announces his destination and then flips open a newspaper and begins checking the sports scores.

So from the driver’s vantage point, your face is buried in, say, today’s China Daily, suggesting that you’re not up for idle chit-chat. But laughing in the face of social niceties, the perhaps equally bored and curious driver breaks out with: “Where are you from?” At first, perhaps, you, the passenger, think the driver has turned on the radio and the question was posed by a DJ during a morning call-in show. But the cabbie, who perhaps would choose the English name “Jeeves” if he were playing

London’s streets, persists. So, not to be rude, you reply: “Costa Rica” — I mean, who doesn’t like Costa Rica? And maybe the driver will take some fare-shaving shortcuts, or at least leave you to your Spanish and sports section. But instead, the driver excitedly replies: “*Guau! Mi tia tiene una casa de playa alli!*” (Wow, my aunt’s got a beach house there!”). Now you realize your friendly fib, your polite prevarication, has some repairs to be made.

Well, I don’t recommend getting into these rush-hour retractions just to enjoy China Daily in the back seat of a cab. I will say that I will welcome back the time when we will even consider whether chatty or stony silent taxi drivers are preferable on long crosstown journeys, hope-

fully as soon as possible. Though, it seems the ancients did enjoy a good silent spell at times, even before the horse and buggy were a thing.

Two bygone Chinese bards had some high praise for the strong silent type, though not necessarily from dawn to dusk.

Li Yu’s (937-978) *I Climb the Western Tower in Silence* expresses appreciation for a solitary stroll in nature.

“I climb the western tower in silence, the moon like a sickle. Clear autumn is locked in the deep courtyard, where a *wutong* tree stands lonely.

Sorrowful parting has cut, but not severed our ties; my mind is still wild.

Separation is just like a taste in head and heart.”

And what many might consid-

er the most well-known poem ever penned in Chinese also expresses the notion that sometimes, regarding chit-chat, less is more when one is deep in thought.

Li Bai’s (701-762) *Thoughts on a Quiet Night (Jing Ye Si)* is deeply nostalgic, and if read with great feeling, might even give the rear-seat fare a rearview mirror vision of a single tear on the cabbie’s cheek.

“There is moonlight shining before my bed,

I suspect that there is frost on the ground,

Raising my head, I gaze at the moonlight,

Lowering my head, I think of my home village.”

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